

Eating Well Should Be a SNAP

by Mari Rich

The link between being overweight or obese and being food insecure (defined as being without access to enough appropriate food for an active, healthy lifestyle) has been widely studied, with nutrition and policy experts in agreement that the situation imposes a great strain on public well-being and the nation's healthcare system.

Low-income neighborhoods often lack full-service grocery stores or farmers' markets at which residents can buy a variety of wholesome food, and residents must rely on small corner stores (bodegas) or fast-food outlets, which peddle high-calorie, low-nutrient products.



This free, downloadable cookbook from Leanne Brown is a practical resource for home chefs needing to cook tasty and nutritious meals on the SNAP budget of \$4 per day.



Culinary educator JuJu Harris of the Arcadia Mobile Market learned from experience how to cook inexpensive meals that are also quick and simple. Her cookbook is free to shoppers on food assistance and on sale for \$20 to the general public.

Thanks to initiatives like mobile farmers' markets, community garden programs, and dollar-for-dollar incentives that effectively halve the cost of fresh produce for those using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps, or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in some areas, that situation is slowly changing. Still, just because good, healthy food becomes widely available, does not mean that everyone will know how to prepare it. According to "It's Dinnertime: A Report on Low-Income Families' Efforts to Plan, Shop for, and Cook Healthy Meals," which was prepared by the national nonprofit group Share Our Strength, 85 percent of the low-income people they surveyed believed that healthy meals were important, but 78 percent admitted that they needed to learn more about how to prepare those meals.

While being faced with Swiss chard or parsnips for the first time can be intimidating, there are cookbooks and classes that can help.

Tasty, Nutritious, and under \$4 a Day

Leanne Brown was majoring in Food Studies at New York University when she decided to tackle a vexing question. Was it possible to prepare delicious, healthy meals on a budget of about \$4 a day, the amount allotted per person on SNAP?

As a graduation project, she developed a set of recipes—colorful, loaded with vegetables, and economical—and prepared a beautifully illustrated PDF, which she made available for free online at www.leannebrown.com. *Good and Cheap: Eat Well on \$4/Day*, as she called the collection, quickly went viral, with so many hundreds of thousands of people downloading it that her site crashed multiple times. Realizing that she had struck a chord, Brown mounted a Kickstarter campaign to fund a print run: if a supporter purchased a print edition of the book, which includes such recipes as Broiled Tilapia with Lime, Spicy Pulled Pork, and Green Chile and Cheddar Quesadillas, she would provide a printed copy to someone with limited or no computer access for free.

To date, she has given more than 12,000 printed copies of *Good and Cheap* to organizations across North America that work with low-income families, and she has entered into an agreement with Workman Publishing, an independent publisher of adult and juvenile trade books, that promises to get tens of thousands of additional copies into the hands of those in need. "So many people on SNAP have dietary restrictions, or live in food deserts, or do not have a proper kitchen, and even the best cookbook cannot solve those problems," she has said. "But if I can help only one percent of the 46 million people on food stamps, that is still 460,000 people."

The Benefit of First-hand Experience

JuJu Harris is a culinary educator and SNAP outreach coordinator with the Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, a nonprofit seeking to create a more equitable food system in the Washington, D.C. area.

on the Homefront

Much of the wisdom she passes on to her clients was gained through personal experience; Harris relied on food assistance during a particularly difficult period. She now travels with Arcadia's Mobile Market, a brightly painted school bus that functions as a farmers' market on wheels. Once set up at a location, she demonstrates recipes to those who might never before have known how to prepare squash or realized that carrots come in colors besides orange. "I teach them what I call my gospel," she says, "which is that healthy eating doesn't have to be expensive, difficult, or time-consuming."

In 2014 Harris had the idea of putting together a basic cookbook to hand out to Mobile Market shoppers, but her co-workers were so excited by the idea that it mushroomed. With the help of a team of volunteers (and a generous grant), she created *The Arcadia Mobile Market Seasonal Cookbook*, a lavish, fully illustrated volume available to Mobile Market shoppers on food assistance for free and to the general public for \$20 a copy.

Deciding What Matters

On occasion, JuJu Harris has taught classes based on an engaging

curriculum developed by Cooking Matters, an initiative of the non-profit group Share Our Strength. Founded in 1993, Cooking Matters is based on the premise that if people are taught how to shop carefully and prepare meals skillfully, they will be healthier and happier.

To that end, Cooking Matters mounts interactive grocery store tours that provide shoppers with hands-on education, giving them the knowledge to compare foods for cost and nutrition. The initiative also includes cooking classes, which meet for two hours, once a week for six weeks. Taught by volunteer chefs and nutrition educators, the classes cover such skills as proper knife techniques and what to do with a whole chicken.

Cooking Matters honors volunteers who teach at least 15 six-week courses with induction into a "Hall of Fame," but David Coder, a chef who was inducted in 2011 and now sits on a Cooking Matters advisory board has said, "The moms who commit to six weeks to feed their families better; the teens who run into class to be the first ones to wash their hands; and the proud wife who told me that her husband lost 60 pounds because of the way she now cooks—those are the people in my hall of fame." ■

Vegetable Quiche, Hold the Crust

Serves 4

\$1.50 / serving, \$6 total

As much as I love this quiche hot, I like it even better cold out of the fridge the next day. It makes a great fast breakfast or lunch (paired with a side salad). The quiche in the picture uses broccoli, but you can make it with pretty much any kind of vegetable. Some of my favorites are roasted green chiles and Cheddar, winter squash with goat cheese, zucchini and tomato, or spinach and olive. Spreading out onions on the bottom of the quiche adds a crust-like layer and a bit of crunch.

The following recipe is an excerpt from Good and Cheap: Eat Well on \$4/Day, by Leanne Brown. Cookbooks like Good and Cheap are helping low-income families to eat healthy on a tight budget. This meal is both healthy and delicious, while only costing \$1.50 per serving.

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 large onion, sliced into half-moons
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus more to taste
- ½ teaspoon pepper, plus more to taste
- 3 to 4 cups chopped vegetables (For hardier vegetables like broccoli, cauliflower, or winter squash, I suggest steaming or cooking them before adding them to the quiche to ensure they'll be fully cooked. For tomatoes, zucchini, spinach, or any other quick-cooking vegetable, just use them fresh.)
- 8 eggs
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup grated Cheddar or other cheese



- 1 Preheat oven to 400°F.
- 2 Melt butter in a cast-iron or ovenproof skillet over medium heat. (If your skillet isn't ovenproof, transfer everything to a pie plate in Step 3 to bake it.) Add onion slices and sprinkle a bit of salt and pepper over them. Cook onions until they are golden brown and starting to caramelize, about 10 minutes.
- 3 Remove pan from heat and spread onions evenly across the bottom. Spread vegetables evenly over onions. The dish or pan should look fairly full.
- 4 In a bowl, use a fork to beat the eggs lightly with the milk, cheese, 1 teaspoon of salt, and ½ teaspoon of pepper, just enough to break up the yolks and whites. This is a savory custard mixture. Pour the custard over the vegetables and onions and enjoy watching it fill in all the open spaces.
- 5 Transfer the quiche to the oven and bake for 1 hour. Once the surface is lightly brown all the way across, it's fully cooked.
- 6 Let the quiche cool for about 20 minutes, then slice into wedges.